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General Accounting Office

COMPLETED

ORIGIN

The National Driver Register--A Valuable Licensing Tool That Needs To Be Improved

The Department of Transportation's National Driver Register can be a valuable tool to State licensing authorities in identifying individuals whose driving privileges have been suspended or revoked. Some States use it only to a very limited degree, however, and other States do not use it at all.

The Department has to determine how the register is currently aiding the States, why some States are not making better use of it, and how it can be improved to help meet States' driver licensing responsibilities.

CED-78-129

JUNE 15, 1978

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UNITED STATES GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20548

COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT DIVISION

B-164497(3)

The Honorable Brock Adams
The Secretary of Transportation

Dear Mr. Secretary:

This letter is to inform you of the results of our review of National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) activities related to the administration of the National Driver Register (NDR). We believe NDR objectives, as set forth by the Congress, are not being effectively accomplished. Although all States and some territories submit data to NHTSA for the register, we found that the data is (1) inconsistent, (2) sometimes incomplete, and (3) not regularly updated.

Further, NHTSA has done little to (1) ascertain NDR effectiveness in meeting the goals and objectives intended by the Congress and (2) periodically determine if the needs of the register users are being fulfilled and if changes should be made to make NDR more responsive.

In addition to the work we did at NHTSA headquarters in Washington, D.C., we contacted driver licensing officials in 16 States. We also obtained data from several highway safety organizations, including the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, Citizens for Better Driver Records, and the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators. Details of our findings and recommendations are presented in the following sections.

BACKGROUND

NDR was authorized in 1960 by Public Law 86-660 to provide State driver licensing authorities with a "central index" of relevant information pertaining to individuals who have had their driving privileges suspended or revoked. The register was initially established to include information on those individuals who (1) lost their licenses because of drunk driving charges or (2) were convicted of traffic violations in which a fatality occurred. In 1966, with the passage of title IV of the National

Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act (Public Law 89-563), NDR was expanded to include information on other types of license denials or revocations. Information was to be sent to NHTSA by the States in cases where licensing privileges were withdrawn because of reckless driving, hit and run, or repeated traffic violations. Currently, NDR should include the names of all individuals having their licenses suspended or revoked for reasons other than the 6-month withdrawal of licenses due to nonmoving violations.

Participation in this program is voluntary and all States, territories, and Federal agencies can participate. NDR information can only be provided to these parties, however, in connection with their driver licensing functions. A legislative proposal is currently pending before the Congress to require all States to submit license denial or revocation information regularly to NHTSA and also to require that States check the register data before issuing driver licenses.

NHTSA officials estimate that during fiscal years 1972 through 1977, $7.5 million in Federal funds have been spent on NDR administration. Federal funds budgeted from program operations for fiscal years 1978 and 1979 are $1.6 million and $2.2 million, respectively. State funds are also needed to carry out the program; however, we were unable to obtain sufficient data to estimate funds expended on the program.

Instructions for program users are included in the 1972 NHTSA publication entitled "The National Driver Register." This publication contains general information on what the program is, how it operates, and the benefits that can be derived from NDR. Instructions describing what information should be submitted, how and when it should be submitted, and how inquiries can be made for information in the register are also included in the publication.

STATE PARTICIPATION

All 50 States and some territories submit information to NHTSA on individuals whose driving privileges have been suspended or revoked. Some States are rather selective, however, as to the type of data they submit. States do not always submit the type of information that was requested by NHTSA. States frequently do not provide information, for example, on when the driving privileges of individuals can be or have been restored.

The States also use the register differently. In 1976, for example, Texas made almost 3.5 million inquiries of NDR. During the same year, Florida made 10; New York, 802; and California, none. In addition, NHTSA officials stated that Federal agencies do not always query the NDR prior to issuing standard Government driver's licenses to their employees. Reasons for not submitting complete information to NHTSA or for not requesting information from the register include the following:

--State legal restrictions (State privacy laws) preclude both the submission of certain data to the Federal Government and State use of register information.

--NDR does not provide sufficient accurate data; in other words, it is not a source of positive identification;

--The NHTSA response to inquiries takes too long.

--Processing data for the NDR program is too costly.

--The data that comes from NDR is sometimes available from other sources. States, for example, can check driving records of out-of-State license applicants directly with the applicants' home States.

The criteria for determining what suspension and revocation information is submitted to NDR varies among the States. The criteria used by some States appears to be based on the types of traffic violations and/or the length of the suspensions. Some States submit all suspensions and revocations. Others omit some suspensions and revocations for certain reasons, such as lack of adequate insurance or those suspensions of short duration.

States do not always submit all data elements to NDR. Some States do not provide the full names, dates of birth, or all of the physical characteristics of the individuals. State statutes also prevent some States from providing the reasons for withdrawing individual driving privileges.

In an attempt to keep NDR current, NHTSA has requested States to supply information on the date individuals are eligible to have their licenses restored, as well as the date the licenses were, in fact, restored. Again, we found that in many cases this information was not being provided. Obviously, the States' failure to provide essential data

to NHTSA means that NDR is, at best, incomplete because the driving status of many individuals is uncertain.

NEED FOR A COMPREHENSIVE EVALUATION OF NDR

NDR officials have done little to periodically determine whether the driver registration system is (1) accomplishing its original objectives or (2) helping the States and other licensing authorities with their responsibilities.

NDR officials measure the driver registration system benefits primarily by (1) the volume of information and data sent to NHTSA by the States, (2) the number of inquiries NHTSA receives from States, and (3) the number of replies that NHTSA makes to the States and other licensing authorities with their data requests. The following table shows the volume of activity for 1962 as compared to the volume for two recent years.

Number of:	1962	1976	1977
Suspensions, restorations, revocations	141,544	2,338,609	1,946,758
Inquiries	766,868	23,644,837	25,011,745
Identifications (note a)	5,403	215,412	216,552

a/Identifications are described as "probable matches" between State inquiries and data stored in the register.

There has been an obvious increase in the volume of activity. This information, however, does not provide a sufficient basis to adequately evaluate the effectiveness or the benefits obtained by the States. Even though in 1977 there were 216,552 identifications by NHTSA, because the register data is sometimes incomplete or out of date, additional information is needed to determine if such identifications benefited the States. The user State must verify the NDR information by contacting another State licensing authority before action can be taken regarding the driver or applicant.

Not all States we contacted could provide us information on how many of the identifications resulted in specific actions on their part, such as refusing to issue licenses to drivers suspended in other States. Officials in 12 States, however, did estimate that in 1976 about 15,650 licenses were either canceled or denied based on

NDR identifications. This number indicates that of the total number of NDR identifications, about 20 percent sent to these States were used to cancel or deny license requests.

In 1975, NHTSA sponsored a study primarily directed at the feasibility and the need for a more rapid response system in providing information to the States and to licensing authorities when making register inquiries. This study was partially a result of a 1973 NHTSA-sponsored report concerning NDR's future driver licensing role. The study showed that the current delivery method--the U.S. mail service--should be replaced with an electronic communication system to shorten the response time. NHTSA officials told us that a demonstration project in which four States will participate is planned for 1981. If the demonstration project is successful, the system will be offered to all States.

In 1977, NHTSA officials said they conducted an eight-State survey to determine NDR utilization. Based on this survey, NHTSA estimated that about 50 percent of the NDR identifications resulted in positive actions by the States, such as referring individuals to remedial driver programs or denying applicants' driver's licenses. This limited survey was the only attempt made to collect this type of information since 1967, according to NHTSA officials.

In July 1977, NDR officials asked the States to provide their views on the value and benefit of the register. Twenty-four States responded, making a number of suggestions on register improvements. As a result of this effort, we were told that a number of minor procedural changes were made to make the program more responsive to States' needs.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

NDR has undoubtedly assisted some States and other licensing authorities with their highway safety programs. However, in view of NDR's basic objective as stated by the Congress--to help prevent States from licensing individuals whose driving privileges have been suspended or revoked in other States--the present system is not effectively accomplishing the intended goals and purposes.

Recognizing that participation in NDR is voluntary, NHTSA can neither direct the States to participate nor can it specifically order States to regularly submit essential data.

We do believe, however, that there is room for significant improvement within the current limitations. To a large degree, the benefit of NDR and the effectiveness of the system depends on the States' and other licensing authorities' willingness to supply up-to-date, essential data. If the States do not provide this information on a timely basis, then NHTSA in turn is unable to provide beneficial information to user States for carrying out their highway safety programs.

In addition to the weaknesses we identified with the submission of data to NHTSA, we identified several factors which will reduce the effectiveness of the register. For example, all States have not fully utilized the register because the register does not, in their view, provide a source of positive identification and in some cases the data can be readily obtained from other sources. Although the program was implemented in 1961, NHTSA has not made a comprehensive evaluation of the driver registration system.

Accordingly, we recommend that you direct the Administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to make such an evaluation to determine system utilization, how well the system is meeting the States' needs, and how the system can be improved to insure that the register will provide maximum benefits to States' and licensing authorities' highway safety programs.

We also recommend that you require the Administrator to issue instructions and provide some guidance to the States in describing the data that is needed to currently improve system effectiveness. Such instructions should describe the specific information that is needed and the frequency with which the data should be sent. These instructions should emphasize to the States that, to a large degree, the driver registration system can only be as effective as they wish to make it.

AGENCY COMMENTS

We obtained oral comments from NHTSA officials on matters discussed in this report and made changes as appropriate. These officials generally concurred with our conclusions and recommendations.

NHTSA officials further informed us they are planning to conduct an NDR system review, including the States' participation in the program. The proposed study will

examine (1) why some States do not fully participate and (2) how useful the NDR data is to those actively participating States. The officials stated they are formulating their plans now and anticipate having the work performed under contract.

The officials also stated that the rapid response demonstration project will include an evaluation of how the data is being used under the project. This evaluation will not be done, however, until after the project is underway in 1981. The officials feel that these studies will help provide the basis for future program improvements.

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As you know, Section 236 of the Legislative Reorganization Act of 1970 requires the head of the Federal agency to submit a written statement on actions taken on our recommendations to the House Committee on Government Operations and the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs not later than 60 days after the date of the report, and to the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations with the agency's first request for appropriations made more than 60 days after the date of the report.

We are sending copies of this report to the Director, Office of Management and Budget; the House Committee on Government Operations; the Senate Committee on Governmental Affairs; and the House and Senate Committees on Appropriations.

We appreciate the cooperation and assistance given by NHTSA personnel during our review and would appreciate being advised of any actions taken or planned on the matters discussed in this letter.

Sincerely yours,

Henry Eschwege

Henry Eschwege
Director

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